

## Iran and the British Media

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*We bring to the attention of our readers this [www.ukwatch.net](http://www.ukwatch.net) interview on the British media's coverage of the confrontation between Iran and the United States with David Edwards and David Cromwell, editors of Medialens*

*The noises being made by the British and US governments are eerily reminiscent of the build up to the Iraq invasion. How has the media responded to this propaganda re-run?*

The US-UK governments and media have quickly managed to transform another defenceless Third World country into another apparently looming threat. It is only five years since the media were rejecting the idea that Iran was a credible part of an "axis of evil", emphasising its vibrant, modernising culture and increasingly close ties to Europe. The Times, for example, wrote:

"He [Bush] has discerned an 'axis of evil' in Iran, Iraq and North Korea... The notion appeared to receive solid support across the country [US], but it is a serious mistake, and the inclusion of Iran the most damaging part... There is no question that Iran can cause trouble... Yet it is a large, sophisticated country, with many friends in the region, including Saudi Arabia." (Bronwen Maddox, 'Why America may have to go it alone,' The Times, January 31, 2002)

The Financial Times commented:

"When George W. Bush used his State of the Union speech this week to place Iran on a par with Iraq and North Korea in an 'axis of evil', he not only dismayed the Tehran government. He also alarmed some of the closest allies of the US, who saw a shift in the administration's stance... European and US officials believe that Iran has been behaving responsibly in Afghanistan. Some of those involved in the Afghan peace process say that, at least in some areas of Iran's foreign policy, the ideology of revolutionary Islam has given way to a more pragmatic approach driven by national interests." (Guy Dinmore and Roula Khalaf, 'America's new enemy,' Financial Times, February 1, 2002)

This was before the US-UK establishment needed a scapegoat to blame for the catastrophe in Iraq, and before it needed a new threat to maintain domestic discipline through fear in the standard manner. Iran is now being presented as a sinister, irresponsible menace determined to wipe Israel off the map - a threat that must be countered. This propaganda closely matches the campaign against Iran: for Saddam Hussein read President Ahmadinejad. For Iraqi links to al Qaida read Iranian links to Shia terrorists. For Saddam's 'intent' to develop weapons of mass destruction read Iran's 'intent' to develop nuclear weapons. For the Iraqi Republican Guard read Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

By last January, the likes of the Guardian's Polly Toynbee were writing:

"Now the mad mullahs of Iran will soon have nuclear bombs, are we all doomed?... Do something, someone! But what and who?" (Toynbee, 'No more fantasy diplomacy: cut a deal with the mullahs,' The Guardian, February 7, 2006)

Gerard Baker provided the answer in the Times:

"The unimaginable but ultimately inescapable truth is that we are going to have to get ready for war with Iran". (Baker, 'Prepare yourself for the unthinkable: war against Iran may be a necessity,' The Times, January 27, 2006)

Baker explained his reasoning:

"If Iran gets safely and unmolested to nuclear status, it will be a threshold moment in the history of the world, up there with the Bolshevik Revolution and the coming of Hitler."

The January 20, 2005, BBC 1 Lunchtime News saw diplomatic correspondent James Robbins declare that US relations with Iran were "looking very murky because of the nuclear threat". (BBC1, 13:00 News, January 20, 2005)

The media has failed to learn even the most obvious lessons from four years ago. On February 16, the US media watchdog, FAIR, recalled how, in the wake of its disastrous pre-war reporting on Iraq, the New York Times had implemented new rules governing its use of unnamed sources. And yet the Times' lead story on February 10 promoting US government charges against Iran contravened these rules. FAIR commented:

"Repeatedly citing the likes of 'administration officials,' 'American intelligence' and 'Western officials,' the article used unnamed sources four times as often as named ones. Only one source in... [the] report challenged the official claims: Iranian United Nations ambassador Javad Zarif, who was allowed a one-sentence denial of Iranian government involvement."

(Fair Action Alert, 'NYT Breaks Own Anonymity Rules,' February 16, 2007; <http://www.fair.org/index.php?page=3042>)

The same is true of much of the British media. Beyond the detail, the fundamental media stance is that the outlandish claims of proven liars within the British and American governments should be taken at face value with little need for critical thought or consideration of counter-arguments.

### **What are the factors that prevent the media offering a more realistic account of the confrontation?**

The media is part of an establishment that benefits from war-mongering, militarism and the demonisation of enemies. US-UK policy in the Middle East is driven by Western corporations'

desire to control oil resources on their terms. That means mass violence, intimidation, punishment of 'rogue states' defying US-UK control, and so on. There are also huge profits to be made from waging perpetual war. As has been observed the similarity between a factory manufacturing nappies and one manufacturing cruise missiles is that the manufacturer goes out of business if the product isn't used. In his first few months in office, Bush appointed 32 former arms company executives, board members and major shareholders to key policymaking positions in his administration. So that's a factor - war is good for a very powerful section of the business community whose influence is deeply entrenched in the political system.

It's usually not that the corporate media consciously conspire to support this system. Rather, 'respectable' comes to be defined as opinion which defers to the establishment's "necessary illusions". To challenge those illusions is to be 'irresponsible', ridiculed, reviled as 'unpatriotic'. Dissidents are deprived of political and financial support, and generally marginalised. What is left is what we read, watch and hear as mainstream output.

### **Are the media entirely wrong in suggesting that Iran aims to develop a nuclear weapon?**

The UN's nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has expressed concern over a lack of transparency in Iran's nuclear programme, but the fact is that it has found no evidence of a nuclear weapons programme. Phyllis Bennis, a Fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies and the Transnational Institute, wrote last month:

"Iran is not a threat to the United States. It does not have a nuclear weapon and is not threatening to attack the U.S; it is a signatory to the NPT and the UN's nuclear watchdog agency has found no evidence of a nuclear weapons program; Iran's nuclear power program, including enriching uranium, is legal under the NPT. Back in 2003 Iran had proposed a comprehensive 'grand bargain' with the U.S., which the Bush administration has ignored. The February 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) asserts that Iran's involvement in Iraq 'is not likely to be a major driver of violence' there." (Bennis, 'Escalating Threats of U.S. Attacks Against Iran,' February, 20, 2007; <http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?itemid=12159>)

Frank Barnaby, of UK think tank The Oxford Research Group, said last year:

"They [the Iranians] don't currently have enough centrifuges working - so far as we know - to produce significant amounts of highly-enriched uranium or even enriched uranium. They would need a lot more." (Sarah Buckley and Paul Rincon, 'Iran "years from nuclear bomb",' [www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk), January 12, 2006)

Given these and other problems, The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) believes it would take Iran at least a decade to produce enough high-grade uranium to make a single nuclear weapon. Dr Barnaby agrees:

"The CIA says 10 years to a bomb using highly enriched uranium and that is a reasonable and realistic figure in my opinion."

So why, one really ought to ask, the sense of imminent crisis?

In any case, the question of Iranian nuclear potential is moot. The real issue is the far greater threat represented by the US, Russia, the UK, Israel and other nations that already possess nuclear weapons in abundance.

Frida Berrigan, a columnist at Foreign Policy In Focus, put it well:

“The contradictions between what the [US] administration is demanding of Tehran and other powers, and the capabilities it is pursuing for its own arsenal, are provocative and dangerous – a pernicious form of nuclear hypocrisy.... Under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the United States agreed to an ‘unequivocal undertaking’ to ‘eliminate’ its nuclear weapons arsenal. Honoring that commitment – and encouraging other declared and undeclared nuclear states to do the same – would undercut Tehran’s arguments about why nuclear firepower is necessary. Oh, and by the way, it would also make the world feel a whole lot safer.”

(Frida Berrigan, ‘Nuclear hypocrisy and Iran’, March 6, 2007;  
<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?SectionID=67&ItemID=12269> )

At root, the issue is emphatically **not** about nuclear weapons. It’s about control of the Middle East’s energy resources; oil, in particular. A constant driver of US foreign policy since the end of WW2 has been about dominating the region. The US State Department in 1945 called the Middle East “a stupendous source of strategic power, and one of the greatest material prizes in history”. (Quoted, Noam Chomsky, ‘Hegemony or Survival’, London, 2003, p. 150).

Iran is now being targeted because it is a convenient scapegoat for the US disaster in Iraq, and because Iran is showing signs of independence. And, like any bully, the US must stamp on the slightest sign of resistance to its authority.

### **How has the british media responded to the claims that Iran is manufacturing IED’s used by Iraqi insurgents?**

By presenting anonymous US government claims at face value and, as usual, by ignoring even the most blindingly obvious questions. For example, do Iraqi insurgents in fact need Iranians to engage in the high-risk strategy of supplying advanced improvised explosive devices (IEDs) known as “explosively formed penetrators” (EFPs)? Michael Knights, chief of analysis for the Olive Group, a private security consulting firm, presented evidence in Jane’s Intelligence Review that Iraqi Shiites have manufactured both the components for EFPs and the complete EFPs.

Knights claims that the equipment required to make EFPs “can easily be found in Iraqi metalworking shops and garages”, and that all EFPs exploded so far could have been manufactured in one or at most two simple workshops with one or two specialists in each – one in the Baghdad area and one in southern Iraq. (Gareth Porter, ‘US Briefing on Iran Discredits the Official Line,’

[http://www.truthout.org/docs\\_2006/021407D.shtml](http://www.truthout.org/docs_2006/021407D.shtml))

Has that elementary observation ever been discussed by the mainstream media? If so, we haven’t seen it. So here’s another question: Is there any evidence that EFPs are being

manufactured in Iraq? The New York Times reported as an aside on February 20:

“An Iraqi unit, aided by American advisers, caught militants in the act of constructing devices known as explosively formed projectiles in a house in Hilla, south of Baghdad, on Saturday, according to the American military.” (Marc Santora, ‘Iraqi Militants Launch Attack on U.S. Outpost,’ New York Times, February 20, 2007)

It seems beyond belief that highly-paid journalists supported by teams of researchers are unable to investigate these issues – but that’s the reality.

**Has there been much difference in the way in which the “liberal” media have reported the Iran question as compared with the more conservative sectors of the press?**

It’s conceivable that the more obviously compromised press on the right wing are more gung ho than the liberal press. There are glimmers of conscience in the liberal press where journalists just cannot help but notice the echoes of 2002-2003 ahead of the Iraq catastrophe. So for example Patrick Cockburn wrote in the Independent:

“The US stance on the military capabilities of Iraqis today is the exact opposite of its position four years ago. Then, President Bush and Tony Blair claimed that Iraqis were technically advanced enough to produce long-range missiles and to be close to producing a nuclear device. Washington is now saying that Iraqis are too backward to produce an effective roadside bomb and must seek Iranian help.” (Cockburn, ‘Washington accuses Tehran, and sets stage for a new confrontation,’ The Independent, February 12, 2007)

By contrast the Telegraph’s Con Coughlin’s is happily repeating his 2002-2003 role of demonising on demand.

But the key point is that the liberal media are fully participating in the demonisation of Iran, as the comments from James Robbins and Polly Toynbee cited above indicate.

**Is it really that significant what the journalists say? Surely people can make their own minds up?**

Yes, it is very, very significant what journalists say. In many people’s minds now – despite the parallels with the lies over Iraq – there is surely a sense that maybe Iran does represent a threat and that something really does need to be done. Maybe Iran would give the bomb to al Qaeda. Can we afford to take the risk? Maybe Iran would attack Israel with a nuclear weapon, if it got half a chance. The novelist and media commentator Martin Amis said on a leading BBC TV political review last October:

“Iran is our natural enemy.” (Amis, This Week, October 12, 2006)

Amis went so far as to claim that Iran would be willing to pay the price of nuclear retaliation in order to annihilate Israel:

“They feel they can absorb this hit and destroy Israel.”

These are really extraordinary claims – more extreme even than most claims made against Iraq 2002-2003 – and of course they have an effect on people’s perceptions.

This propaganda is crucial because it means the groundwork is being laid for a military attack. If and when that attack comes, the public may well not be as outraged and opposed as they ought to be. Their response may be one of shock and concern, but they may feel it was in some sense necessary. This means the kind of public horror and revulsion that could lead to genuine rejection of killers like Blair, Straw, Bush and co, and a genuine demand for real alternatives (ie not Brown and Cameron), will once again have been pacified and neutralised, and the killing will continue into the future as it always has in the past. All it needs is for a critical mass of journalists to “normalise the unthinkable” to use Edward Herman’s phrase – to create a sufficient level of fear, doubt and deference to those proclaiming the urgent need for mass violence. Herman has written:

“There are almost no holds barred, and almost nothing in the way of subversion and military attack that the mainstream media won’t normalize. After all we are WE, the good and necessary policeman in service to global interests.” (Edward S. Herman, ‘Nuggets from a Nuthouse, Part 4: Meaningful Elections and Establishment Relativism,’ Z Magazine, March 2007)

When we take a step back from the propaganda we can see that this constant emphasis on mass violence as the solution of choice to the world’s problems is really strange. Why in the 21st century, with all our wealth, sophisticated communisations, technology and interconnected economies, would we believe that employing essentially medieval methods such as firing cruise missiles and dropping bombs is the best or only way to solve these problems? It really is a form of feigned social insanity in our view.

### **What would a more honest media be telling us about Iran?**

That Iran offers no threat to a West bristling with doomsday nuclear weapons. That any Iranian use of nuclear weapons would result in instant national annihilation – it would be history’s first known act of national suicide. That Iran is of course completely aware of this, as was Saddam Hussein (one reason why the latter did not deploy his biological and chemical weapons during the 1991 Gulf War). That high-tech surveillance equipment can detect any attempts to manufacture the components required to produce weapons of mass destruction. That, motivated by greed for oil, Britain and America organised a military coup in Iran in 1952 which toppled the democratically elected government of Mussadiq. That the same Western powers then sent hundreds of tanks and thousands of guns to prop up the terroristic dictatorship of the Shah. That, in the words of veteran Middle East reporter Charles Glass:

“The United States has one strategic interest in the Middle East: oil. Everything else is gravy, sentiment, rhetoric... American transnational corporations do not care about Israeli settlers and their biblical claims, Palestinians who are losing their land and water, Kurds who are caught stateless between gangsters in Baghdad and Tehran [and Ankara], victims of war or torture in Sudan, Afghanistan, Algeria, South Lebanon [Saudi Arabia, Israel, Kuwait, Turkey]...” (Glass, New Statesman, November 15, 1996)

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